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Paul Jarley  
*University of Iowa*

Sarosh Kuruvilla  
*Cornell University, [sck4@cornell.edu](mailto:sck4@cornell.edu)*

Douglas Casteel  
*University of Iowa*

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## Member-Union Relations and Union Satisfaction

### Abstract

This paper examines the importance of various facets of satisfaction with union representation in determining overall satisfaction with the union. Samples of union members from Iowa and Sweden are used in the analysis. The results clearly support the view that member-union relations is a major determinant of overall satisfaction with union representation.

### Keywords

labor unions, satisfaction, membership, Iowa, Sweden

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# Member-Union Relations and Union Satisfaction

Paul Jarley  
*University of Iowa*

Sarosh Kuruvilla  
*Cornell University*

Douglas Casteel  
*University of Iowa*

***This paper examines the importance of various facets of satisfaction with union representation in determining overall satisfaction with the union. Samples of union members from Iowa and Sweden are used in the analysis. The results clearly support the view that member-union relations is a major determinant of overall satisfaction with union representation.***

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Fiorito, Gallagher, and Fukami (1988) note the importance of employee perceptions of member-union relations as a determinant of satisfaction with union representation. In this note, we provide evidence from two diverse samples—union members in Iowa and in Sweden—that supports Fiorito *et al.*'s finding. The similarity of the results across these two samples suggests that the primary determinants of union satisfaction may transcend cultural and organizational differences in industrial relations systems.

## Data and Method

Fiorito *et al.* used data from the 1977 Quality of Employment Survey. Our data are drawn from two surveys conducted in late 1987 and early 1988 which employed a similar instrument. The first, a sample of 1,651 Swedish union members, constitutes a representative cross-section of union members whose nationals are affiliated with SACO/SR, the major professional union federation in Sweden. The second sample consists of members represented by three local unions in Iowa. Together, these three locals negotiated contracts in a variety of industries within the manufacturing and public sectors. Responses were obtained from 181 members; missing data decreased the sample to 173.

Unlike Fiorito *et al.*, who utilized a facet discrepancy model of overall union satisfaction, we use reported satisfaction with various aspects of union representation to predict overall union satisfaction. The facet discrepancy approach views a member's overall union satisfaction as the weighted sum of discrepancies between expectations and perceived union performance on relevant facets (outcomes) of the representation role. The direct measures of satisfaction with the facets of representation utilized here can be seen as the respondent's own assessment of the gap between expectation and perceived outcome on each facet. Given that Fiorito *et al.* reported member expectations concerning union efforts as more homogeneous than perceived outcomes, and that perceived outcomes are more important determinants of overall union satisfaction than expectations, respondent differences in reported satisfaction with a given facet may simply be a function of differences in perceived outcomes. Regressing overall union satisfaction on these satisfaction facets makes it possible to obtain estimates of the relative weights respondents place on various aspects of representation in determining their general satisfaction with the union.

*Variables.* Overall Union Satisfaction is measured by the question: "Overall, how satisfied are you with the job being done by your union?" Responses were recorded on a five-point scale, ranging from "Very Satisfied" (value coded as 4) to "Very Dissatisfied" (value coded as 0). To enhance comparability, we constructed indices measuring the same facets of union satisfaction as those identified by

Fiorito *et al.*<sup>1</sup> Bread-and-Butter Issues focuses on satisfaction with union efforts to obtain better wages, fringe benefits, and job security for members. Member-Union Relations centers on satisfaction with internal union communication, handling of grievances, and the rank and file's influence on union policy formation and implementation. Quality of Work Life includes the union's ability to get management to improve the intrinsic value of the work. The items used to construct these indices are reported in the Appendix. Responses to all items are on the same five-point scale used to assess overall union satisfaction. Consistent with Fiorito *et al.*, indices are created by averaging the responses to the relevant items. Higher index scores are expected to have a positive impact on the overall measure in all three instances.

Given the rather small size of the Iowa sample, the poor performance of various union-member and job-related characteristics in the models reported by Fiorito *et al.*, and the relatively low correlations between these characteristics and the factors of interest, such characteristics are omitted from this analysis. However, because Fiorito *et al.* find that general attitude toward unions has a significant impact on union satisfaction, we include an eight-item index, General Attitude Toward Unions, which assesses the respondent's views on the labor movement's ability to obtain gains and influence the economy. This index can be distinguished from the overall union satisfaction measure in that the latter asks respondents to assess their satisfaction with the specific union that operates at their place of employment. We expect that higher scores on the General Attitude measure will lead to higher overall union satisfaction, all else constant.

## Results

Table 1 reports OLS estimates of the model for our two samples. Both standardized and unstandardized parameter estimates are presented. The model explains over 70 per cent of the variance in overall union satisfaction for the Iowa sample and approximately 60 per cent of the variance in the dependent variable for the Swedish data.<sup>2</sup> In general, the parameter estimates carry the expected sign and are significant at the .05 level. The one exception is (satisfaction with) Quality of Work Life. In the Iowa sample, this variable is positive but insignificant at the .05 level. Given the high correlations between the three facets of satisfaction utilized as independent variables in the Iowa sample, this result may indicate problems of collinearity rather than the unimportance of quality of work life issues.<sup>3</sup>

The unstandardized parameter estimates are essentially the same across the two samples. A joint test of the hypothesis that the four parameter pairs of interest are equal produces an F-statistic well below standard levels of significance ( $p > .16$ ). It appears that a similar relationship holds across these two diverse samples.<sup>4</sup>

The standardized parameter estimates reported in Table 1 highlight the relative impact of relations with members on overall union satisfaction. In the Iowa sample, a one standard deviation change in Member-Union Relations produces a .65 standard deviation change in Overall Union Satisfaction. This can be compared to the .14 standard deviation change in Overall Union Satisfaction that

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<sup>1</sup> The facets we used parallel those used by Fiorito *et al.*, but the items used to construct the indices differ. In general, more items were used to construct the Bread-and-Butter Issues and Quality of Work Life indices in the Fiorito *et al.* study, while the items used to construct the Member-Union Relations index are richer in our analysis. Although the items in the Member-Union Relations index differ across the two samples used in our study, repeating the analysis with a Member-Union Relations measure restricted to those items common to both samples produced no substantive changes in the results.

<sup>2</sup>Ordered logit estimates yield similar conclusions concerning the relative importance of Member-Union Relations in determining Overall Union Satisfaction. These results are available from the authors upon request.

<sup>3</sup>Fiorito *et al.* also note high collinearity among their perceived outcome measures. The correlations for the satisfaction indices are as follows: Iowa sample: Bread-and-Butter Issues - Union-Member Relations = .65; Bread-and-Butter Issues - Quality of Work Life = .60; and Member-Union Relations - Quality of Work Life = .61.x Swedish sample: Bread-and-Butter Issues - Member-Union Relations = .41; Bread-and-Butter Issues - Quality of Work Life = .40; and Member-Union Relations - Quality of Work Life = .44.

<sup>4</sup> Interaction terms designed to identify differences in the unstandardized parameter estimates across the two samples produce insignificant t-statistics for all but Bread-and-Butter Issues. Although the t-statistic is only marginally significant ( $p < .0495$ ), this result does suggest that bread-and-butter issues may be a more important determinant of overall union satisfaction in Sweden.

results from a one standard deviation change in Bread-and-Butter Issues. The corresponding estimates for the Swedish sample are .55 and .29, respectively. F-tests of the joint hypothesis that all four of the standardized coefficients are equal within the model leads to rejection of the null hypothesis at the .0001 level in both samples. Similarly, a test of the hypothesis that the standardized coefficients for Bread-and- Butter Issues and Member-Union Relations are equal is rejected in each sample at the .0001 level. This clearly supports the view that relations with members is a major determinant of satisfaction with union representation.

TABLE 1  
DETERMINANTS OF OVERALL UNION SATISFACTION  
(STANDARD ERRORS IN PARENTHESES)

	Iowa sample		Swedish sample	
	Unstd. Beta	Std. Beta	Unstd. Beta	Std. Beta
Intercept	-1.501** (0.203)		-1.902** (0.116)	
Bread-and-Butter Issues	0.176* (0.069)	0.136	0.371** (0.023)	0.290
Member-Union Relations	0.835** (0.072)	0.652	0.808** (0.028)	0.546
Quality of Work Life	0.065 (0.056)	0.058	0.083** (0.019)	0.078
General Attitudes Toward Unions	0.208** (0.074)	0.135	0.079* (0.38)	0.035
N	173		1,651	
R-square	0.771		0.593	
F-tests:	F = 18.144**		F = 131.616**	
All standardized betas are equal:				
Standardized Bread-and-Butter Issues = Member-Union Relations	F = 34.045**		F = 77.758**	

\* Significant at 0.05 level; \*\*significant at 0.01 level.

## Conclusions

The importance of member-union relations as a determinant of overall union satisfaction, first reported by Fiorito *et al.* (1988) and replicated here, raises several important issues. The robustness of these results across diverse samples indicates that the union's handling of internal union relations plays a major role in how rank-and-file members assess their union. Collective bargaining gains on bread-and-butter issues are hardly inconsequential to the rank and file's evaluation of the union, but it is clear that members consider union feedback, democracy, and the delivery of union services as critical. It has been argued that union leaders tend to underestimate the relative importance of internal communication and union democracy as membership priorities (Kochan, 1980). Our results, and those of Fiorito *et al.*, suggest that perceived improvements in these areas by the rank and file could go a long way toward improving satisfaction with union representation.

Improvements in union-member relations may also have a positive impact on union commitment. Employee perceptions of their treatment by an employing organization (a limited conceptual analogue of member-union relations) have been shown to influence organizational commitment, after controlling for such factors as job satisfaction and worker characteristics (Angle and Perry, 1983). Enhancing member commitment through improvements in union-member relations may have important implications for union effectiveness. For example, the United Food and Commercial Workers' success in organizing a Joslin, Illinois IBP plant has been credited

to voluntary organizing (AFL-CIO, 1988). The willingness of members to provide such efforts must depend upon their satisfaction with the union.

Union satisfaction can be a key factor in preventing or defeating union decertification votes (Bigoness and Tosi, 1984).<sup>5</sup> Unlike wage and fringe benefit gains, which ultimately depend on the employer, member-union relations are primarily within union leadership control. Moreover, union democracy, a facet of member-union relations, appears to have a significant impact on the probability that unions will win representation elections (Maranto and Fiorito, 1987). While it would be unwise to suggest that internal union reforms designed to improve member-union relations hold the key to labor's resurgence, this does represent a major area in which unions themselves can bring about change.

## Appendix

The following items were used to construct the Bread-and-Butter Issues, Member-Union Relations, and Quality of Work Life indices. All responses were made on a five-point scale, ranging from "Very Dissatisfied" to "Very Satisfied."

QUESTION: How satisfied are you with your union in terms of:		
	Iowa Data	Swedish Data
a. Getting better wages for members?	BNB	BNB
b. Listening to the concerns of members?	RLTNS	RLTNS
c. Getting better fringe benefits for members?	BNB	BNB
d. Getting management to improve the work itself?	QWL	QWL
e. Improving job security?	BNB	BNB
f. Keeping members informed about union affairs?	RLTNS	RLTNS
g. Encouraging members to express their opinions about how the agreement might be improved?	RLTNS	RLTNS
h. Giving members a say in how the union is run?	RLTNS	
i. Handling member grievances?	RLTNS	RLTNS
j. Union representative's dexterity in handling grievances?		RLTNS
k. Handling grievances justly and fairly?		RLTNS
l. Availability of union officials when you need them?	RLTNS	
BNB = Bread-and-Butter Issues; QWL = Quality of Work Life; RLTNS = Member-Union Relations.		

Cronbach alphas for the multiple item indices are as follows: Iowa sample: Bread-and-Butter Issues = .78, Member-Union Relations = .90, General Attitudes Toward Unions = .82; Swedish sample: Bread-and-Butter Issues = .53, Member-Union Relations = .82, General Attitudes Toward Unions = .74. In general, these alphas are comparable to those reported by Fiorito *et al.* (1988). Except for the Bread-and-Butter Issues measure in the Swedish sample (alpha = .53), these values are considered moderate to high, implying that the composite scales are of average to better-than-average homogeneity or internal consistency. In the case of the exception noted, the moderate to low alpha value in the Swedish sample suggests that additional or alternative items would better measure the bread-and-butter issue construct in Sweden. For example, the benefits item may not correlate as strongly with the wage item in Sweden relative to Iowa because more employee benefits are provided by the state or in centralized bargaining in Sweden.

<sup>5</sup> It is also worth noting in this regard that Leigh (1986) reports that dissatisfaction with union representation has a strong negative effect on unionized workers' desires for representation.

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